

GOP chairman on edge of rift within party

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Jonah Kaauwai's future as chairman of the Hawaii Republican Party is in doubt after several members of the party's executive committee urged him to step down or be removed.

In a confidential email on Sunday to the GOP's state committee, members of the committee said former Gov. Linda Lingle and other top Republicans have lost confidence in Kaauwai's leadership.

The email cited a party debt of nearly \$100,000 and questioned Kaauwai's ability to build a grass-roots organization and recruit candidates so the party can be competitive in the 2012 elections.

Kaauwai said he is in discussions with other Republicans about how to proceed. The party's state committee is expected to meet on Oct. 15. Under the party's rules, a two-thirds vote of state committee members present at the meeting is required to remove him.

"I want to do what is best for all Republicans in the state," he said.

Kaauwai said Lingle wanted him to step down before the party's state convention in May. He believes the former governor, who is considering a Republican campaign for U.S. Senate next year, is behind the effort to remove him.

"From conversations with the eight on the list, she is encouraging them to ask me to step down," he said of the committee members behind the email. "No doubt."

Lenny Klompus, a former spokesman for Lingle, said Lingle did discuss the party's future with Kaauwai before the party's state convention, but he said Lingle did not initiate the executive committee's actions.

"She is not behind it," Klompus said.

Kaauwai was first elected chairman in 2009 and re-elected for another two-year term at the party's state convention when he ran unopposed.

GOP insiders said privately that internal rifts that have existed within the party for months had reached a crisis point.

"It's an internal family matter," said House Minority Leader Gene Ward (R, Kalama Valley-Hawaii Kai), who is on the committee.

Many Republican activists have been frustrated by Kaauwai's lack of fundraising success, his management of party operations and his direct appeal to conservative Christians in the governor's race last year which turned off independents and moderate Democrats.

Lingle and former U.S. Rep. Charles Djou, who is running in the Republican primary in urban Honolulu's 1st Congressional District, have been crafting bipartisan messages for 2012 that might be undermined by Kaauwai's aggressive conservatism and pugnacious approach to majority Democrats.

In a written statement, Kaauwai said the GOP's focus in the past has been on "a few elite candidates" # a clear reference to Lingle # a strategy he said has sacrificed the party's principles, many legislative candidates and its grass-roots base.

"The result has been that although we had a Republican governor in office, during elections/races, Democrats ran for dozens of state offices unopposed," he said. "In order to change this outcome, we must become a populist principled party that is focused on the only mission that matters: electing Republicans into all offices."